



## “The degree of personal freedom and responsibility is unique!”

*Contextual Studies are an integral part of the curriculum and a unique feature of the HSG degree programmes. However, curricula are crowded and students overworked. So, what is the value added? How can Economists benefit? Are Contextual Studies translating into better careers? **Caspar Hirschi**, Professor of History and Academic Director of Contextual Studies at the HSG, answers the questions.*



**Students are making a huge personal investment. Earning a Master’s Degree is not only a lot of work but also means several years of good salaries lost. What is the value added of contextual studies? Is it worth the money?**

A provocative answer to a provocative question: Contextual studies are of inestimable value; they save students from the fallacy of economic reductionism. By analyzing social, political and economic topics from the critical perspective of humanities and social sciences, we make sure that students will not succumb to the idea that everything in life, from job prospects to personal health, from love to family, from social interaction to political engagement, can be measured in terms of value added. Thus, we help them to succeed better in life and to be more useful to society.

**Students are overworked and the curriculum is crowded. Do we need more training in leadership skills and understanding of the context, or is it better to devote more time to digital skills, programming and core economics? What is the right balance?**

The answer here is: it depends. Contextual studies offer students the opportunity to specialize in a variety of concentrations and skills. The degree of personal freedom and responsibility is unique. We encourage students to choose areas of concentration where they can acquire complementary competences to their core subjects, and we help them to reflect on their learning progress in both core and context studies through their portfolio work. This is how we promote “integrative thought”, one of the key goals of HSG.

**You and your colleagues have developed areas of concentration to bring more focus into**



**contextual studies. How will they complement the training of economists?**

Students can choose an area of concentration according to their personal interests or professional aspirations. If a young economist aims for a global career in an international environment, a specialization in “Cultures” may help a lot. If he or she is fascinated by the promises and dangers of digitization, “Technologies” will offer an ideal solution. If he or she strives for a better understanding of the societal forces affecting the economy, “Society” will be the right choice, etc.

**You are a professor of history. How can a good historical perspective lead to better decision-making in public policy and in the world of business?**

The study of history does not enable us to predict the future more precisely, but it helps us to avoid the same mistakes over and over again. Historical knowledge can be especially useful in periods such as ours with no shortage of prophets claiming that “this time is different” without having a clear grasp of the past. The current predictions about automation and artificial intelligence are a case in point. As soon as we get a clear grasp of their histories, we are able to distinguish experts from charlatans.

**What are the topics of your own research? What are you doing when you are not teaching history and not managing contextual studies? Are you addicted to some special private hobbies?**

I’ve just published a book on the history of scientific expertise and its political use (and misuse) in the history of Western Europe. The next project will be about “politics of automation” from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Privately, I love sports, especially football and hiking.

For more information, please visit

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